



## Introduction: A Compass in the Mist of Poetic Realism

Poetic Realism . . .

whether good or bad,  
gave glory to French  
cinema and was sold  
around the world. It has  
been imitated abroad but,  
God knows why, nobody  
makes this kind of movie  
better than the French.

—PIERRE BRAUNBERGER,

*Cinémamémoire*

## 1938: THE APOTHEOSIS OF POETIC REALISM

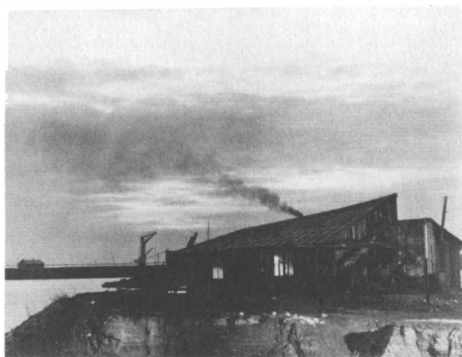
Poetic realism hails us with a most nonchalant greeting, one that few of us take time to acknowledge. Most scholars nod in recognition and then move on in the crowded marketplace where films are hawked on all sides. But if one were to stop and answer back, as I have chosen to do, and if one hoped to gain or build whatever is possible when a rapport with anything or anyone is accepted, then a process of acquaintance, suspicion, and comprehension will be initiated that might be termed a cultural hermeneutics.

There is no reason to hold an allegiance to poetic realism. Neither the name itself nor the films huddled under the porous umbrella of that name should be taken as sacred. Nevertheless, to distrust, and even to disparage the term, while following out the directions it indicates, is to proceed in good faith. It is to proceed as students of culture always should: without the illusion that our constructs are solid, and without the greater illusion that we can do without constructs altogether.

Let us summon poetic realism, then, by letting it summon us. Let us gauge the power of this kind of film in 1938, when it was at its apex, by looking not at a sublime instance but at Marcel Carné's *Hôtel du Nord*, a standard star vehicle, neither high-nor lowbrow. *Hôtel du Nord* was meant to slipstream behind the phenomenal and rather unexpected success of his previous effort, *Le Quai des brumes* (1938). Evocative locations, characters from the lower social class, a downbeat ending, and a quartet of fabulous actors constitute the recipe for both films. *Hôtel du Nord* was not to be lionized by critics the way its predecessor had been. It was too patently a commercial venture



*Hôtel du Nord*: "Atmosphère. . . Atmosphère."  
MOMA



*Le Quai des brumes*: More atmosphere. BFI

full of compromises, little jokes, and lapses in taste to aim at the formal unity achieved by *Le Quai des brumes* and *Le Jour se lève*, that third "somber tale" Carné delivered before the war.

Some of those jokes seem aimed right at the high seriousness of the style itself. The film's most memorable line, one of the most memorable in all French cinema, comes out of the broad Parisian mouth of Arletty when she is tired of the way her cultured and taciturn protector, played by Louis Juvet, has treated her. As he leaves to go fishing for "a change of atmosphere," she calls out in a saucy voice: "Atmosphère. Atmosphère . . . bonne pêche et bonne atmosphère." Is she spitting not just at Juvet's pretensions but at the studied gloomy atmosphere suffusing *Le Quai des brumes*?

Yet the success of *Hôtel du Nord* was exactly one of acting and tone, whereby Juvet, Arletty, Jean-Pierre Aumont, and Annabella exuded the kind of fluency yet familiarity that characterized James Stewart, Gary Cooper, and Claudette Colbert in this same epoch. As in a Frank Capra film, we relish the dreams of these down-and-outers, in this case dreams of voyages and double suicides. Beyond the dramatic contrivances such dreams lead to, we relish the social celebrations that provide their backdrop: a first communion, a Bastille Day street dance.

Quietude distinguishes *Hôtel du Nord* from its American competitors at the festivals and box offices around the globe. Those raised on Hollywood fare might have allowed the fated lovers to mumble their despair to one another but must have awaited a dramatic surge to carry them away to their glory or their doom. *Hôtel du Nord* withholds any such surge. It scarcely has a denouement to point to; rather the Bastille Day dance swings each character out toward some corner to await the final fade-out. Juvet arranges his own end, smirking at the smiling gangster whose gunshots are mistaken for firecrackers. The lovers return to their bench beneath the bridge on the canal and

ponder a bleak future. Arletty packs and leaves the hotel for good, leaves it to the peculiar proprietors and guests who inhabit this milieu and make it worth our attention.

*Hôtel du Nord* replaces a cinema of events with one of people, language, and milieu. It asks its viewers to enjoy the ordinary interplay of social types on the ordinary streets of Paris. Of course neither those streets (the picturesque canal Saint Martin and le quai des Jemappes that runs beside it) nor those types (Jouvet as the pimp, Arletty as the whore, Bernard Blier as the cuckold, and so forth) are ordinary at all. An idealized, poeticized reality encourages viewers to measure the reach and aspiration of their own ordinary lives, to look for the picturesque details in their own homes and neighborhoods, waiting for the chance to blurt out to a friend, a lover, or an enemy their own versions of the colorful repartees and tender sentiments Henri Jeanson had written so “naturally” for the cast.

That an unmistakably commercial venture such as *Hôtel du Nord* could triumph so readily in 1938 certifies the epigraph that opens this chapter. The French did indeed know how to make dark films and sell them worldwide. Compared to the highly plotted and gaudy American cinema, poetic realism promised far more integrity. For example, it promised authenticity in its sets, which were recognized at the time for their detail, their nuance, and for the way they seemed to participate in the dialogue and action played out upon them; whereas Hollywood sets, at least those the industry lauded with awards, stood off as added attractions that the audience might applaud, as when the curtain goes up at the overture of an opera.

No one applauds *Hôtel du Nord* that way, though the magnificent footbridge on which the film opens will carry us across to a fascinating world of people and incidents. When we return to that bridge in the finale, we are satisfied that this is our *quartier*, or could be ours, and that it is worthy of our attention and imagination. Few Hollywood films of the time draw us in quite the same way,



*Hôtel du Nord*: “The Discourse of Sets.” BFI



*Hôtel du Nord*: “The Spectacle of Actors.” BFI

or were meant to. Hollywood's classic prototype of this genre, *Grand Hotel* (1932), features standard studio elegance as the setting proper to showcase its cast of stars. Exceptions, such as *The Informer* (1935) or *Peter Ibbetson* (1935), were deemed "European" in look.

*Hôtel du Nord* is not a classic but just a very good film produced at a moment when it seemed easy to make good films. Its quietness and poverty of incident mask its self-assurance. In the same year and in another, much more complex film, *La Bête humaine*, Jean Gabin and Simone Simon would exchange some of the most violent and erotic language and looks the cinema was then capable of, yet they would do so in an equally subdued, whispering tone, letting audiences monitor the incredible pressure underneath the sad routine of ordinary life.

Such calculated repose in even the most violent or exotic films identifies the poetic realist sensibility. It is a sensibility that flourished in France in the 1930s, involving more than the internationally celebrated directors we have mentioned. Pierre Chenal, for example, had little reputation outside the industry in which he labored. But his relentless, nigrescent *Crime et châtiment* (1935) makes one want to apologize for Joseph Von Sternberg's ostentatious version, made the very same year. At the decade's end Chenal adapted James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (*Le Dernier Tournant*) with a tone of understated but general discontent that in their versions neither Tay Garnett (1946) nor Bob Rafelson (1981) would care to imitate or, for that matter, be able to fathom.

American cinema has always invested in maximum shock effects, in bursts of song, violence, eros, or language. Poetic realism diffuses such energy in a warm mist of style that mutes the sound and brightness of every effect, even as it washes over us and seeps down to the roots of feeling.

## A NATIONAL PROJECT

Every identifiable aesthetic originally develops within a national context, even if it later bleeds across political borders. Thus cinematic expressionism is first of all German, and only later does it serve as an apt way of describing, among others, Eisenstein's final films. It is in this sense that poetic realism is properly identified as French.

A history of any national cinema written from the perspective of political economy necessarily tells a debilitating story, because it views the past from the standpoint of the conquerors of that past, the Classic Hollywood Cinema and its avatars. But there is more to the history of French cinema, or any national cinema for that matter, than political economy can tell. **There is a cultural and psychic economy that demands another form of history, one that accesses the French cinematic mentality.** A proud nation, France has always

proclaimed the difference of its institutions, or at least the difference of its style of participation in institutions. In a word, it believes in its "distinction."

Claims about the special nature of French cinema continually ooze from right-wing and left-wing magazines, from official governmental proclamations, and from the announcements put out by the film industry. They establish a virtual, if phantasmagoric, axiom: French cinema may obey the laws of international economy, but it retains an inner purity exempting it from the debasing consequences of that system. Its purity is thought to descend from the hallowed traditions of literature and painting that underlie filmmaking in France more than in any other country, lending it a subtle moral edge that it has occasionally exploited against Hollywood businessmen. In addition, the cinema spreads French culture to new audiences at home and abroad.

A typically soothing response to the fear of sound film can be found in a 1929 article called "Toward a French Style of Cinema," which warns producers not to imitate American films by turning to ersatz theater, particularly of the boulevard variety. To recover its cinematic mission France needs but two elements, organization and style, both of which aim at "unity of expression," something that is practically a national instinct. What is the French style? We are quickly told: "a certain precision of contour and rhythm, a mixture of darkness and poetry, occasionally a quality of eloquence that seems to be ours alone, and above all a sense of architectural line, a genius for simple sturdy construction."<sup>1</sup>

Poetic realism took up this standard in the 1930s, and on a battleground of uneven terrain already staked out by other kinds of movies representing sizable economic forces. On the one hand, this new, delicate French strain asked for special attention and consideration from audiences and critics alike. On the other, these same films had to compete with Hollywood at the box office. Hence, their appeal fell somewhere between the sophisticated and the popular, an elusive target that French cinema has aimed to hit ever since the founding of the Film d'Art company in 1908, and especially since the *ciné-club* movement of the 1920s. The leader of that movement, Louis Delluc, may have been responsible for recruiting intellectuals to turn to the cinema, but he was also adamant that the medium maintain its lifeblood through connection to the lower classes. It was he who first announced that "the cinema will be a popular cinema or it will not be at all."<sup>2</sup>

To negotiate this middle zone, those responsible for poetic realism adopted a literary demeanor. Its very name referenced literature or, at least, literary ideas. It would be up to poetic realism to prove that serious cinema, taken with the seriousness generally accorded to literature, could at the same time be as irrefutably alluring as Hollywood films.

To define French cinema with Hollywood in mind, then, is not merely a heuristic exercise, for French cinema has developed in relation to this explicit competition. Arguments over the very invention of the medium pit Louis

Lumière against Thomas Edison, the victor determined evidently only by the chauvinism of whatever historian you are reading. There is no argument, however, regarding the early mastery of the field. The French dominated the world hands down. Centrally located, and with far more experience in international entertainment trade, they were without rivals up to World War I. Georges Méliès opened an office in New York, and, at least up to 1911, Pathé Frères distributed more films from its New Jersey offices than any of the American companies, including Edison.

But 1914 put an end to all that as it did to so much more. Four years of hostilities left the cinema business open to the nonbelligerents. Sweden and America prospered, making films in untroubled circumstances, selling them to all countries. When the rest of the world awoke from the nightmare of World War I, it found itself caught in the midst of a gentler dream spun in a land of sorcerers: Hollywood. Forever after the world would look to Hollywood as it would to any sorcerer, with a mixture of fascination and fear.

Hollywood played on these feelings, manipulating the international market to suit itself. Just consider the unilateral reconfiguration of the medium to include sound. With this stunning business gambit, Hollywood incurred the wrath of smaller industries unable to afford the required audio technology. The French were most vociferous. The cinema was their invention, or so they believed. Now a cartel of crass studio heads from across the Atlantic were intent on starving the already anemic French production. In the process the art of cinema was being permanently disfigured.

And so the period of concern to us could not start on a bleaker note. In 1929 only sixty of the four hundred films projected in France were French, and 80 percent of all receipts found their way back to Hollywood. Bringing with it both immense capital and up-to-date technology, Paramount of Paris immediately became France's leading production company. As a consequence the French populace must have assumed that the movies were a rightful Hollywood phenomenon: they routinely watched more American than French films. In contrast, although Americans went to the movies more often than the French (some twenty-three times annually per capita in this era), they most likely would never encounter a French film.

How had such a situation developed? First of all, the structure of Hollywood gave it an unbeatable advantage. A virtual monopoly held by what would eventually amount to eight vertically integrated studios kept foreign films from all but a few designated import theaters in New York. Production, distribution, and exhibition in France, on the other hand, competed with one another, permitting foreign interests a foothold. Since 95 percent of theaters in that country were independent and unchained, power lay in distribution. Subsidiaries of Hollywood studios quickly began to control distribution, pressuring theaters into exclusive deals with them. After all, they could provide Hollywood stars and spectacle. Soon second-line genre pictures began to per-

petuate themselves through this system. Audiences became used to westerns and Mickey Rooney vehicles and routinely went back to see them.

And so, while their facilities and personnel were easily capable of turning out 250 films a year, in the 1930s France produced half that number. Not only was this a financial loss and a failed opportunity for idle artists, the massive importation of American films had invisible consequences for cultural identity, that is, for "French" ideology. From 1925 on an alarm decrying this situation was sounded in French trade papers, an alarm that continues to this day. A panoply of emergency strategies has been deployed. Most of these have been economic in nature: taxes on imported films and on the dubbing of films; the required employment of French personnel in dubbing; quotas limiting imports, then limiting the number of weeks theaters might play foreign films; the blocking of funds made by American companies from leaving France.<sup>3</sup>

Far more interesting are those textual strategies aimed at product improvement and differentiation. This was defense by counterattack, with consequences for the history of film style. Since, with its vast technical and financial resources, Hollywood was unassailable in the realm of spectacle, certain French producers introduced guerrilla tactics, launching distinctively French offerings that emphasized regional characters, dialects, tales, and lore that Hollywood could never copy or assimilate. Because the international language of the silent film exploded in 1930 into a Babel of dialects, the possibility was raised of innumerable independent fiefdoms ruling over local terrain. French stage plays, cheap to reproduce on film, could bring to a large French audience the witty and often socially attuned dialogue that playgoers in Paris enjoyed. And this dialogue could be spoken by actors the whole country had heard about but few had ever had the opportunity to see in person. From 1930 to 1934 the national theatrical genius flowed onto film in the form of farces, satires, boulevard comedies, and melodramas. Many, such as Marcel Pagnol's, were spiced with regionalisms.

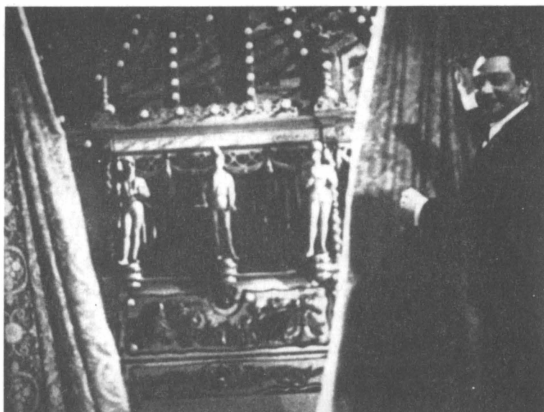
A second strategy flowed from the magic words "cinema of quality," first pronounced with missionary zeal in this context of trade around 1930. With "quality" the French would dare to strike back not at regional outposts but at the center of the American power. Quality was to match up with, and defeat, the ungainly American cinema of "quantity," and not just in France alone, for this would be designated an export line of movies. Hollywood was pictured as an assembly-line factory, whereas all films made in France were thought to develop in an individual, hence more natural and human, manner. The standardized genres and studio styles of the factory were countered by the healthy diversity of French subjects, each treated in a style tailored specifically to it. As for working conditions, the alienated writers and contract performers in Hollywood were said to lack the morale maintained on French projects by talent who considered themselves artisans, heirs of a medieval guild system. Furthermore, these artisans could take pride in their devotion to a grand proj-



ect as well as in their relations to co-workers with whom they formed a team or *équipe*.

Such an argument had a material basis. The absence of an integrated studio system in France meant that each film gestated as a unique venture. In 1937 only a handful of French producers were involved in more than one film, no producer involved in more than six. Hollywood studios, by contrast, turned out as many as fifty films each. Everything in a French film of export quality was built around the writer-director team who offered a project to a producer (frequently a friend). Jacques Prévert and Marcel Carné formed the most famous of such teams, but there were many others. Often an actor was included in the package, which, once under way, grew with the addition of a trusted cameraman, designer, and composer. Such teams frequently traveled together from project to project, getting to know and respect one another. This contributed to that wholeness of atmosphere that bathes each of the famous poetic realist films of the late 1930s, this and the fact that in a system of such liberty, where projects develop along lines of friendship and acquaintanceship, often the very best artisans were eager to join in. Take music, for instance: cinema attracted prominent composers like Darius Milhaud (who in his career composed 24 scores), Georges Auric (125), Maurice Jaubert (19), Arthur Honegger (40), and Jacques Ibert (29). The composer, along with the rest of the *équipe*, met frequently with the director to contribute to and share the overall design of the film.

The difference between the systems stands out visibly in set design, as we saw with *Hôtel du Nord*. When the technical shooting script is handed to the designer and properties manager in Hollywood, they outfit the sets with the backdrops and props available in the studio warehouse. Every item may be of first-rate quality, but nearly every item has been used in earlier films and few would be constructed with the current project in view. By contrast, to take an illustrious French anecdote, when Jean Renoir asked Eugène Lourié to construct the château set of *La Règle du jeu* (1939), Lourié started from scratch.



*La Règle du jeu*: A prop comes center-stage. CB

Perhaps the limits of the budget show; certainly the château does not have the brightly lit expanse of a Paramount set, but Lourié's château grew up around the possibilities inherent in the script and contributed possibilities all its own: a staircase to separate (and connect) the servants from the aristocrats, redoubts and closets to permit the camera its hide-and-seek game with the action. Furthermore, Lourié's wife combed Parisian antique shops in search of the mechanical toys collected by the Marquis. Indeed the role of the Marquis was enlarged once Renoir saw what Mme Lourié had collected. Its natural childbirth, so to speak, gave this and the better French films an artistic edge over Hollywood products that were doctored by specialists working serially and in increments.

How successful was this strategy? French cinema even today likes to measure its strength by the stir it creates. Box-office statistics were not even tabulated and published during most of the 1930s; so the luminous image that French cinema projected was thrown primarily by the discourse kept up by critics, journals, and official proclamations.<sup>4</sup> Films made for export naturally received far more critical attention than others, shaping an impressive "front" of the industry that was often disproportionate to their commercial success in France.

What is the artistic "image" of French cinema worth? Under its lure some producers were tempted to take on striking projects proposed by writers and directors looking to raise the cultural stakes of the cinema. No matter what the economic realities of poetic realism, then, its image was not only a source of pride, most critics were certain it upgraded the importance and impact of the national cinema.

#### ETYMOLOGY OF AN AESTHETIC

I do not believe the words "poetic realism" ever entered into the discourse of producers, distributors, or exhibitors, in the way that labels like "western," "musical," or even "neorealist" certainly did. Symptomatically, the origin of the term came by way of literature. It was conferred by Jean Paulhan, editor of the prestigious *La Nouvelle Revue française*, on Marcel Aymé's *La Rue sans nom*, a 1929 novel about a handful of forgotten people who languish in the dark suburban streets of Paris. When Chenal adapted this work late in 1933, relying on location shooting, the reviewer for *Cinémonde* declared, "This film, in my view, inaugurates an entirely new genre in French cinema: poetic realism."<sup>5</sup> He then distinguishes the "artificial realism" of standard cinema from Chenal's breakthrough and he links that breakthrough to a concentration of the caldron of contemporary social life seen at its most squalid but most lively.

This was a quiet baptism, very unlike the case for a movement like Surrealism. Intellectuals who knew little about cinema were apt to pay attention to Surrealist films because its name brought with it debates in both literature and

painting. Moreover, filmmakers began to think of, sometimes to promote, their new projects in relation to the ongoing sense of the Surrealist mission, as though that mission were an entity one could adhere to, carry forward, and be rewarded by. Poetic realism, in contrast, commanded no adherents, promulgated no doctrine. Its name did not arise in the workplace, so to speak. It did not accompany the films associated with it, cuing the way they should be read or indicating in advance their projected import. It was in effect a fabrication of the critical establishment, and it remains so today.

A fabrication, however, is by no means a fiction. Some label was required to help sort out the increasing number of films that displayed at least a common ambition. Without the convenient genre categories of Hollywood, without a governmental body to speak for it (the only major European cinema left to fend for itself in this way), and without a vertically integrated industry (indeed without a substantial production company after 1934), French cinema appeared on screens in piecemeal fashion, only the names of stars guiding the viewer and the critic in their efforts to harmonize what they saw week after week.

One can imagine the anxiety pervading a filmmaking community that could scarcely predict what, or how many, films it was liable to bring out each year. The fact that production remained constant (between 110 and 140 films each year from 1934 to 1938) suggests that certain economic and marketing factors were quietly regulating the flow of this laissez-faire industry, but its identity was another matter. Certainly, successful ventures were repeated with variations (military comedies, for example), and producers made sure to concoct scripts congenial to the dominant presence of certain stars, whose names unquestionably served as the one reliable lure capable of catching the attention of prospective viewers. But since no single producer planned for more than a couple of films each year, French cinema developed haphazardly.

In such apparent absence of constraint, independent initiatives could sprout and take their chances. Nothing in the system could have predicted *Le Quai des brumes*, for example. It belonged to no nameable genre. Its astounding success sent critics searching their memories of earlier films to give substance to the feelings it aroused. Adjectives like “romantic,” “moody,” “pessimistic,” cropped up. Understandably, poetic realism became a concept to latch on to.

Should it surprise us that foreign critics more comfortably identified this trend than did the French? Politics split French critics on every film, fragmenting an already fragmented situation. With a haughtiness born of the recent ascension of the Popular Front, the communist critic Georges Sadoul saluted the triumph of Jacques Feyder and Carné over German competition and even over the alluring but vapid Hollywood films of the time.<sup>6</sup> While he was singularly aware of the stylistic pedigree of these directors (he mentions Emile Zola, Louis Feuillade, D. W. Griffith, F. W. Murnau, and German expressionism), he was much more anxious to applaud their realist (and “antifascist”) temper-

ament. Yet other critics, and not just right-wingers, found poetic realist themes and characters puerile and evasive. Renoir went so far as to contradict Sadoul, labeling *Le Quai des brumes* "fascist," and thereby initiating a rancorous response, as we shall see.<sup>7</sup>

Foreign critics ignored such differences. At the Venice Biennale, for example, appearing against the background of Italy's "white telephone" genre, Julien Duvivier, Carné, and Renoir stood out for their astounding seriousness and pessimism. Meanwhile, "French films of the late 1930s became the first substantial body of foreign-language pictures to interest American audiences. In major American cities, a few little 'art theaters' sprang up to show them."<sup>8</sup> One after the other, *La Kermesse héroïque* (1935), *Mayerling* (1936), *La Grande Illusion* (1937), *Regain* (1937), and *La Femme du boulanger* (1938) received the New York Critics Prize as best foreign film.<sup>9</sup> As different as they may be, they were taken as sharing a particular sensibility, one that distributors knew how to direct to a certain class of viewers. A survey of the *New York Times* reviews for the whole decade shows not only the large number of films that played in the city (170 are reviewed) but also how highly they were valued: a great majority are praised, often for outscoring Hollywood in artistry, taste, and maturity of content and execution.<sup>10</sup> Especially after 1935 the *Times* repeatedly gives the impression that something about French mores, tradition, education, or language destines its better films to be serious, candid, atmospheric, and strangely dark. The review of Jacques Feyder's *Pension Mimosas*, to take an example nearly at random, speaks of "the fondness of the traditionally gay French for films of somber tragedy." *La Bandera* is praised for "its camera consciousness . . . its ability to suggest mood and regulate tempo," that makes it "possible to get behind the externals, to develop the drama psychologically, to build up steadily to the close of the chase and then with typical Gallic fatalism and irony . . . leave the solution to destiny." Perhaps most telling is the *Times's* reaction to Jeff Musso's *Dernière Jeunesse*, since this was a rather ordinary film of 1939. Although it received little attention in its own country, the American reviewer seemed predisposed to its poetic realist tone: "A macabre, shadowy drama of jealousy and fear, with a certain somnolent attraction which we can attribute to the performances and to its director's conjuration of mood."<sup>11</sup>

Outside France, then, a "cult" value began to accrue to "the school of poetic realism," as it came to be known in the 1940s.<sup>12</sup> Paul Rotha snidely says, "French films were thought to have something to do with 'culture,' something to do with sophistication. The word most often used to describe them was 'mature.'"<sup>13</sup> He found this aesthetic jejune: "[These films] all focussed on the individual against a background of poverty, crime, and violence. . . . These misty waterfronts and low dives were excellently rendered and photographed, but their 'life' was a subjective one. . . . Beautifully made, sensitively acted, they were films of defeat in which the British and American intelligentsia

discovered poetry.”<sup>14</sup> Evidently large audiences in Buenos Aires and Tokyo were also drawn to this defeatist sensibility. When World War II cut off French exports, foreign critics froze poetic realism into a single, solid, and dazzling block. Even in postwar France, the politically motivated dissension these films caused at their premieres evaporated; suddenly everyone regretted “the school of poetic realism” that had brought such glory to the nation.

Textbooks and coffee-table volumes<sup>15</sup> could now size up its impact in an overall history of cinema. They have made the movement official by citing a small catalog of traits and a few canonized films. *Le Quai des brumes*, because of its single-mindedness and concentration, has dominated these appraisals of poetic realism. When, in its very first scene, a bedraggled Gabin shuffles down a foggy road, he evidently ushered in a new morality, a new, anonymous hero, and a new style of filmmaking, comparable to the change wrought twenty years later by Jean-Paul Belmondo in Jean-Luc Godard’s *A bout de souffle*.<sup>16</sup> “With its moon-lit port town enveloped in fog and inhabited by symbolic people with exotic-sounding names, *Quai des Brumes* [sic] creates a fantastic, stylized world in which reality and imagination merge into one, but which is still essentially real and true. The most tangible quality is the sense of anxiety and finality. . . . All the elements of style are perfectly blended and balanced.”<sup>17</sup>

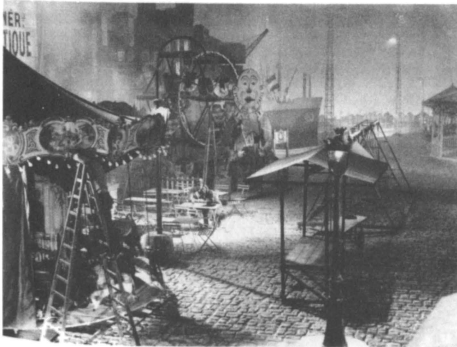
The sheer gravity of this film is sufficient to attract a plethora of others coming before and after. Jean Vigo’s *L’Atalante* (1934) may seem closer to magic realism, for the objects crammed within its frame convey not fatality but a liberating sense of possibility; still Vigo’s only feature film confirms the movement of the best French directors away from action or intrigue and toward milieu. The same point has been made for the bucolic lyricism of Pagnol and the tragic naturalism of Renoir: even though neither fits willingly or comfortably into the poetic realist camp, their films belong to an era dominated by its conception of story and character, and by its attention to evocative physical detail. Similarly, less well known examples, like Jean Grémillon’s 1930 *La Petite Lise* can now be taken into the movement; after all, it was reviewed at the time as a film that “created an atmosphere surrounded by destiny, *fatum implacabile*.”<sup>18</sup> Thus for the historian who can make use of it, a large galaxy of films swirls around the textbook constellation of dark stars that Carné released in the waning years of the Third Republic. Alan Williams’s authoritative *Republic of Images* provides a catalog of both traits and films putatively belonging to poetic realism, although he is careful to point out that “few labels in film history are as vexing,” and that “it is arguably not a school. . . . Nor is it a genre, yet it is something more than a style.”<sup>19</sup>

As for film theorists, their reach is always centrifugal. André Bazin, we have seen, was attracted to *Le Jour se lève*, because it exemplified in a supreme way that “balance” between attention to the everyday and a heightened concern for subjective mood that he felt to be definitive of modern cinema. Jean Mitry was prepared to extend this balance outward in his expansive and sympathetic

survey of poetic realism. Because of its moody romanticism, Mitry mingles this style with that of Von Sternberg, Frank Borzage, and the German *Kammerspiel*.<sup>20</sup> He calls it an “attenuated expressionism inserted into the norms and conditions of the immediately real where symbolism is reduced to things, to objects.”<sup>21</sup>

Mitry came to such wide-ranging ideas in the very milieu of Popular Front Paris. A schoolmate of Pierre Chenal, frequent critic for *Pour Vous* and *Cinéma-monde*, and co-founder of La Cinémathèque française, he was on hand to witness and publicize what he saw as the progress of French sound cinema. And so it is hardly surprising that poetic realism should take its place literally in the center of his massive *Histoire du cinéma*,<sup>22</sup> where it functions as a touchstone, the most indicative and progressive use of the medium in the first decade of sound. Unlike related genres of the time such as social realism, psychological realism, and psychosocial lyricism, which he judges ponderous and tendentious, poetic realism maintains contact with social experience analogously, not directly; it models social experience by means of a cinematic experience that chemically transforms whatever facts make up its climate.

Like Carné he would gladly exchange the term “poetic realism” for Pierre Mac Orlan’s more precise *fantastique social*. The stories Mac Orlan concocted between the wars, *Le Quai des brumes*<sup>23</sup> foremost among them, were designed, like all tales of the fantastic, to engender “disquiet and mistrust” but to do so in the manner of nocturnal street photography rather than eldritch lore. In the twentieth century, our own urban landscapes exude the eerie more readily than do the Gothic settings of traditional tales of this genre.<sup>24</sup>



*Le Quai des brumes*. BFI



“Le Fantastique social.”

*Le Quai des brumes*. BFI

Poetic realism earns Mitry’s respect because it respects cinema, whereas propaganda, social or psychological realism, and the fantastic all commandeer the cinema to transport spectators outside the movies to some recognizable or foreign land. Poetic realism, on the other hand, promises to drive its enfolded

spectator into an ever-deepening cinematic world. For this reason its impact on film history was the greater, for it developed an interplay of registers that led to strikingly concentrated effects.

In his theoretical writings, Mitry went on to hypostatize poetic realism, a term so haphazardly introduced at the time of the Popular Front. Whether specifically French or not, this kind of cinema fulfilled the dual role of the medium signaled in the title of his treatise: *Esthétique* (the appeal of the poetic) *et psychologie* (the need for realism) *du cinéma*.

The version of film history that Mitry narrates and that textbooks have disseminated brushes dangerously against both formalism and narcissism. This history of the great tradition of poetic realism values formal developments which point the way to the cinema that, in all senses of the term, “becomes us.” In this process the bulk of movies fall into oblivion, since 80 films, 100 maximum, are all one needs of the decade’s 1,275 to establish this tradition.

Social historians of every stripe have come to challenge this hegemonic view of the decade by opening up the full archive for inspection. To the student of popular culture these 80 films stand as a mere genre (films of “dark pessimism”)<sup>25</sup> within the larger system of the French film industry and the larger needs served by a range of genres. Moreover, when treated as one part of the chief “popular entertainment medium” of the day,<sup>26</sup> poetic realism hardly fulfills the vaunted social claims made for it by the likes of Sadoul.

Shortsighted and morally anemic, this genre, like nearly all the films of the time, evaded pressing political problems and wallowed in regret. Few French films, none of them commercially viable, lifted their heads out of the sand to confront the economic depression and the fascist threat head on.<sup>27</sup> None of the poetic realist writers or directors came from the working class; this is evident when one tallies up the problems they fuss over (virginity, for example), problems that apply aptly to the petit-bourgeois moral code that was officially promulgated in the country but that did not keep the proletariat awake at night.

As Rotha was quick to note, because it appealed to an international and literate audience, including later generations of film lovers like us, the poetic realist canon is suspect. Berated as too lax in its “social” ambition,<sup>28</sup> or as too pretentious in its “cultural” ambition, poetic realism has been consecrated by a purely formal appreciation that has obliterated whatever work cinema as a whole performed in its social context.

In exploding the canon, the modern historian may appear to exercise a professional obligation to recover the entirety of the past, yet here too self-interest asserts itself. The “us” that the past helps constitute has changed even in the few years since Mitry, Bazin, and Sadoul assessed it. If today’s historians are likely to emphasize the social dimension of the films of the Popular Front era, one can thank changes in the politics of academic life since 1968 or the

inspiration of François Mitterrand's socialist government that came to power in 1981. To use the title of Geneviève Sellier's provocative article, after Mitterrand we all suddenly became "remarkable inheritors of the French cinema of the 1930s."<sup>29</sup>

But what we have inherited is certainly not everything that the 1930s tendered; rather it is what we require: a socialist vision in politics and the aspirations for the cinema it gave rise to. For better or worse, this vision and these aspirations descend from the films that made an impression so indelible it can be retraced today; that is, the films of Renoir, Carné, Duvivier, and Grémillon remain with us, not the "cinema du samedi soir." Even in their most powerful moments, these directors were not in direct touch with the heartbeat of the masses (a case that could be made for a Fernandel) or with the key issues confronting Europe (as was the *cinéma engagé*).<sup>30</sup> Instead their social relevance—hence, their relevance to Mitterrand's France, Sellier argues—must be indirect, through the importance of particular narrative strategies and investments. The ideological density at the heart of Grémillon's *Gueule d'amour* (1937), for example, derives from an inspired script that conjoins in the same female figure (played by Mireille Balin) both the object of the hero's desire and the representative of the cavalier upper class that oppresses him. When the enraged hero (Gabin) strangles her, his doomed gesture can be read as deeply revolutionary. Admittedly, Grémillon's assessment of his era's social problems may be partial, and his "solutions" may be escapist. Nevertheless his film remains powerful for its ingenious, yet precarious, balance of individual aspirations, social forces, and the destiny of sentiments. Sellier believes that he learned this balance from Honoré de Balzac and Zola whose aesthetic precedent allowed him to sculpt a sophisticated model of subjectivity that indirectly gives us access to a Popular Front perspective. To study a film as clairvoyant as *Gueule d'amour* is to seek to understand indirectly the social and psychological sensibility of a particular past. This may also tell us about our sensibility as we return, with nostalgia or obsession, to a former time.

We have reached the forking paths in film historiography. In one direction lies the canon, for even with social issues in mind, to focus on a figure as substantial as Grémillon<sup>31</sup> inflates the specific power of a certain cinema above other films, other modes of expression, and perhaps even above its culture. The danger is that "indelible" masterpieces and their auteurs are all too easily taken as transcending their era. The other direction veers toward a sociology that claims to establish (often statistically) a rapport between cinema and the social trends of the day. The danger here is that, no matter how comprehensive such a study may be, or how attentive to the myriad genres and topics of a complete archive, the social touchstone it employs neuters whatever it is that films bring to culture, reducing them to evidence, the equivalent of votes in an election or public speeches or caricatures found in newspapers.



Anyone who takes films seriously surely conceives of them as involving more than the unpredictable intuitions of inspired artists and more than the fully predictable output of a social mechanism of popular culture. For the one concerns itself with masterworks as though they were autogenetic and the other treats the movies as engendered by social forces and laws. Those who credit the cinema with having, if not a mind of its own, at least a body of works and practices, must look beyond the hypotheses of either autogenesis (in the case of auteurism) or social engendering. The body of films within the larger body politic of culture has something to say about the way we should assess French cinema of the 1930s. This is the point of departure of a team of scholars who have arrived at what they call, in the very title of their stunning book, a *Générique des années 30*.

The term *générique* refers in the first instance to the “generic” network that interrelates films by topic and theme. The authors—Michèle Lagny, Marie-Claire Ropars, and Pierre Sorlin—deliberately unknot this network and even unravel the threads of individual films in order to retie them in various “series” that model the mechanism of an industry of the social imagination. Without qualms, they manipulate the films so as to look behind them (at their staging) and in front of them (at the investment of audiences paying to see them). The series they draw up are intentionally diverse and include depictions of collectivities (such as the army), individual stars (like Harry Baur and Gabin), thematic taboos (as in the representation of the colonies), and repeated narrative rituals (the public/private reversibility of main characters). These are not formal traits but structures of representation that “generate” the figural possibilities of the films of this era. These possibilities, it turns out, are concentrated in the credits (*générique*) of each film. It is here that production hierarchies, audience fetishes, and dramatic structures stand revealed.

In modeling the unconscious system at the root of French cinema, *Générique des années 30* treats filmgoing as a repetition compulsion driven by the names of a coterie of stars. The limited roles that could be scripted for them inevitably congeal into still more limited dramatic and imaginative possibilities. Stars, roles, plots, and themes are shown in case after case to rise into the spotlight, then split apart, motivating a quest for unity that absorbs but never fully satisfies spectators. The “lack” structured in each film requires the production of further films with modified *génériques*. Thus, once off the ground, French cinema of the 1930s was virtually self-sustaining, but it was also, and for the same reason, monotone. Under the spell of an ingratiating narration that asked little from them, under the greater spell of a *générique* that froze them in their seats, spectators of the time admired, but did not enter into, the feigned sacrifices of the actors playing before them on the screen.

The ingenious critical coup of the *générique* exacts a price paid for by history, or by the possibility of historical development. Discounted in advance is the

importance of variety both in films and in audiences; in this kind of structural analysis, a single mass spectator sits mesmerized before the single block of "the film of the 1930s."<sup>32</sup> To recover variety and change, without resorting to the kind of "exceptionalism" implied by the masterpiece approach, and without abandoning the scorching attention to films implied by the *générique*, I need to introduce another French term, *optique*, so as to give French cinema access to something outside itself, access precisely to the culture of the 1930s.

### CULTURAL SPHERES AND THE NOTION OF *OPTIQUE*

In his first major book, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, Roland Barthes called on the concept of *écriture* to open a wedge in Jean-Paul Sartre's binary literary theory.<sup>33</sup> For Sartre, literature could be reduced to an interplay of language and style: the one general, universal, and impersonal (as in a *générique*); the other idiosyncratic, spontaneous, authentic (as in a masterpiece). Barthes found this view suffocating and ahistorical. By *écriture* he meant to designate the limited plurality of literary options available in any epoch. Barthes's term motivates both my investigation into cultural history and my understanding of aesthetics as these work together to locate what was artistically or rhetorically available. Because it is dependent on cultural history, the notion of *écriture* allows for the development of movements, for shifts in taste, for competition and variety among audiences. It helps make concrete the mysterious operations of the auteur (who chooses a particular aesthetic option before contributing personal style), while at the same time it specifies the aesthetic and cultural fields within which artworks make their mark.

By *optique* I designate *écriture*'s equivalent in the domain of cinema. *Optique* is meant to retain the original structuralist connotation Barthes first intended for *écriture*, a connotation that has been largely lost after the term's assumption into the complex theories of Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and others. More pertinently, *optique* suggests the ocular and ideological mechanisms of "perspective," both of which aptly play roles in the medium of film. Finally, its position in the dictionary allows *optique* to carry an echo of *option*, of a limited set of possibilities alive at a given moment in a specific cinematic situation. Although it can be conveniently used to differentiate groups of films, in fact the most genuine application of the term *optique* as I conceive it involves the specification of audience expectations, needs, and uses.

It is in this sense that poetic realism can best be seen as an *optique*. Among types of filmmaking in France during the 1930s, it exercised the option that has most deeply fascinated film scholars and international audiences. The restricted narrative scope of these films, their heavy atmosphere and sustained *largo*, hamper the vision and the understanding of audience and characters

alike, forging a complicity between spectator and drama that one does not find in any other type of film in that era. For example, “entertainments,” whether comic or social, catered to a spectator who paid to enjoy and judge what was displayed, while historical films and propaganda were meant to impress and instruct a spectator whose applause or assent was requested. Renditions of boulevard theater successes, to take up the most ample genre of the decade, aimed to set admirable acting, dialogue, and plots before an audience that gathered precisely to admire such performances.

These representative types of films traded in different ways on spectatorial distance and discernment, be it the discerning of quality performance, or of tough political analysis, or of the pattern in a clever intrigue. Poetic realism, on the contrary, does not flaunt its talent or authority. It is, as I shall repeatedly show, and despite appearances, nontheatrical in its methods and, more crucially, in its mode of address. When examined alongside other films of the 1930s, the poetic realist text seems to invite its spectators onto the screen, seems to invite them to merge with the sensibility it expresses. The spectator plods forward hand in hand with such a film, unconscious of any voice behind the screen, be it satiric, consoling, analytic, or knowledgeable. The spectator of *Le Jour se lève* is as helpless as is its doomed victim.

Who was this spectator, and why was this somber cinematic *optique* appealing? We know poetic realism earned prestige among sophisticated audiences prepared to take some risk at the movies. Might this not be the same audience who would shortly applaud the closely related existentialist aesthetic of Albert Camus and Sartre? Poetic realism lays claim to such an elite reception by disingenuously laying itself open as a type of direct “experience.” The ordinary tragedies of daily life, so deliciously repeated in such films, are not rendered homiletically as in a sermon about the poor and downtrodden, but are figured directly. Poetic realism promises to deliver not a message about frustrated desire, or oppression, or bartered hopes, or helplessness, but the very experience of these feelings.

Such an aesthetic function was neither forged by the genius of a handful of auteurs nor inevitably ground out of a mindless moviemaking machine. It owes its existence to historical and cultural circumstances that involved strong directors and the conditions of the industry, to be sure, but that, more specifically, were characterized by the particular rapport the cinema developed with renegade literary, musical, and artistic figures during the heady days of the Popular Front. In turn, the aesthetic forms spawned by this *optique* affected the standard films of the day, the other arts, and the whole cultural atmosphere. In order to find these films consequential, one does not have to believe that poetic realism helped bring the Popular Front to power (its heyday came about only later) or helped the Third Republic fall (though this is what the right wing claimed). The press they received at home and abroad testifies to their public prominence. I plan to look at both the films and the culture for the

source of that prominence, practicing a hermeneutics that strives to understand the culture from the films and reciprocally that teaches us how to watch the films from the culture.

Between the high road of political history and the folk path of personal biography lies the varied landscape of culture, a landscape whose ecology features the complex and contradictory interplay of institutions, expressions, and repressions all subject to the force fields of power. The cultural historian bears, to the limit, the burden of the contested middle, by insisting on a stance between the already hermeneutic enterprises of the critic and the historian. Refusing to stop at the boundaries of texts, as do most critics, yet unwilling to seek an era's "imagination" by direct, disinterested investigation (philosophic or historical), the cultural historian proceeds, by methods of supple interpretation, to read and weigh culture in texts and texts in culture. In this way the logic of changing values can be understood as felt.

Every history that treats the cinema must calculate the importance of films within a world larger than film. From the perspective of the film scholar, culture surrounds the film like an atmosphere comprising numerous layers or spheres, as numerous as we want. One may identify these as though they successively encompass one another moving from the center (the individual film) out toward the stratosphere of political structures and events. Intermediate layers might include the film industry, film history (the tradition of genres, the biographies of filmmakers), the status of the other arts, the institutions of culture, and the organization of social classes.

My revision of French film in the 1930s derives in part from the spheres I choose to emphasize (the nebulous zone between high art culture and popular culture), but it derives more certainly from a belief in the permeability of all spheres. The fluidity of its object forces any cultural hermeneutics to abandon the hope of full command over its "material," but by devoting itself to complex interaction, it can observe disturbances in one sphere affecting the situation in another. Moreover, the direction of this interactive flow is reversible, although it is usually tracked from the top down. For example, a change of government may bring in a new minister of education or of leisure who promotes the expansion of literary journals. These journals may, in turn, promote an aesthetic that works its views on the legitimate theater. Ultimately film acting, including the kinds of roles created for, or chosen by, key actors may literally encourage a specific cinematic style, amounting to a significant alteration in the way the culture represents itself on the screen.

Cultural interaction can be treated as a continual trickle-down process from government to popular expression only in states exercising the most rigid political control. The fact of censorship is a notorious reminder of how governments themselves can be disturbed by images bubbling up from beneath the cultural surface. Who can forget the way the French ministry flinched at

violent filmic discourse or at local vigilante groups whose intermediate discursive spheres might include the Church (the case of Luis Buñuel's *L'Âge d'or*, 1930) or the educational establishment (Vigo's *Zéro de conduite*, 1933). Censorship is an index of the power that films evidently deploy beyond the sphere of the strictly cinematic. No history with aspirations of thickly representing an era's cinema can ignore this traffic among spheres, in this case between texts and institutional structures.

Beyond keeping all spheres actively in mind the film historian ought to identify the most pertinent sphere within which to track the (shifting) values of cinema. Pertinence depends both on the researcher and on the topic under scrutiny. Take the period that concerns us. In establishing the special relevance of a particular cultural sphere containing subgroups such as the Surrealists and the novelists published by Gallimard, I mean to challenge a study like that of Francis Courtade, for example, whose *Les Malédiction du cinéma français* examines French films within the atmosphere of official history (political proclamations, censorship rulings) and official events in the film world (technological innovations like sound, economic developments like the fall of Gaumont). In certain revolutionary eras such as that of the Soviet Union of the 1920s, Courtade's focus seems apt; the Soviet film historian ought to follow very closely the major events of public life, since cinema explicitly participated in a national reawakening. But in the interwar period of France, cinematic values were forged and debated less in the political sphere than in the cultural sphere, or rather in the nebulous zone where transactions between high and popular culture were possible. The effect on cinema of personalities from the established arts outweighs, from my perspective, all governmental and most economic pressures. And so the involvement in cinema of novelists and publishing houses, classical composers, painters, architects, and playwrights is more than anecdotically significant and is meant to do more than validate a popular art. Such involvement testifies to changes in the function of cinema and helps specify the direction such changes took. This cultural sphere is pertinent precisely because it identifies the site of development in a cinema that, from the perspective of other spheres, can hardly be said to have changed at all.

In brief, a cultural history of cinema must reconstruct the options of the times, neither through the direct appreciation of its products nor through the direct amassing of "relevant facts," but through an indirect reconstruction of the conditions of representation that permitted such films to be made, to be understood, even to be misunderstood, controversial, or trivial.

I have determined to put into focus the address of films, because, as a spectator myself, it is the films that seem to address me. By examining the event of their broadcast, the situation in which they first spoke in the way they do, one avoids the narcissism of teleological histories that force the past to submit to the rule of the present and that neatly suggest a single world of the movies.

The films that beckon us are entrances to a different way of being a spectator, not totally different (else how could we ever intuit that something lies there for us?) but different enough to tempt us to construct the spectator to which they are addressed. Thus the historian must understand not their style so much as the *optique* that makes them possible, and that at the same time models a possible world that can still be fleshed out. As a historian, I am a spectator ready to become another spectator.